“We believe embodiment isn’t simply an interesting possibility for education, nor is it an alternative practice or method: embodiment is.”

(Perry and Medina, 2011)

A person’s whole body is involved in learning and experiencing the world. That is why it is important to understand all the modalities involved in learning, rather than focusing solely on reading and writing. We know that speaking and listening are important aspects of the language arts, but so is “doing.” We use our hands to make things and our whole body to express ourselves. Dance, drama, sports, computer programming, and visual arts are expressions of meaning that draw upon multiple modalities to communicate and create. Incorporating movement, speech, and other modalities into students’ reading and writing taps into their full range of meaning making.

To help frame this month’s reviews, Lucy Spence collaborated with Stephanie Milling. Milling is a dance educator who describes embodiment as the kinesthetic expression of a performer’s intention. A dancer communicates most clearly when fully committed to expressing an idea, theme, or concept that underpins the movement in a dance. Through the dancers’ embodiment and outward expression of movement ideas, the audience is able to read the dance. Whether or not the choreographer’s intention is fully understood is not the point. Instead, embodiment is a means to help the audience grasp the essence of the choreography and develop an informed perception about the meaning of a dance.

This insight into the embodiment of meaning might pique readers’ interest in the books reviewed in this issue. These books allow teachers to connect with visual artists, dancers, dramatists, language teachers, special educators, and technology users who incorporate multiple modalities into literacy teaching and learning.

A Reason to Read: Linking Literacy and the Arts

In A Reason to Read, the performance cycle is described as a framework for utilizing the arts throughout instruction. It is a way to involve students in making meaning as they read and write in academic settings. The cycle consists of building community, entering text, comprehending text, creating text, rehearsing/revising text, and performing text. After a performance, the cycle begins again. The performance cycle was developed by authors Landay and Wootton through the ArtsLiteracy Project—a collaboration between artists, performers, and teachers who work together to motivate and encourage literacy development in students from elementary school through high school in the United States, Brazil, and Mexico.

Shirley Brice Heath, whose work was clearly an inspiration to the authors, wrote the foreword. The introduction follows, framing the performance cycle within current pedagogical theory and research. Beginning in chapter one, Landay and
Wooton walk the reader through the performance cycle. Classroom vignettes paint a detailed and inspiring portrait of arts-infused teaching and learning, followed by a discussion of why and how to teach this way. Chapters one through seven include detailed descriptions of teaching methods and how they can be implemented in any classroom.

Students’ own interests and concerns lead to essential questions that are explored during the performance cycle. For example, in two classrooms, one in the US and one in Brazil, students responded to violence in their communities by creating cordels (cords strung across a space with papers attached). These cordels of poems and stories allowed students to express their feelings and hopes for their communities through writing. Other performances involved tableau, puppets, choral reading, and various combinations of modalities. These performances connected to readings from Shakespeare, Hinton, and Cisneros, among other authors.

The performance cycle methodology includes developing essential questions, reading and re-reading texts, creating written texts, and responding to the text through movement. The performance cycle is something that can be used not only in the ArtsLiteracy Project, but in any classroom. This book contains many ideas to infuse movement and the arts into teaching. (LKS)

Smart Moves: Why Learning Is Not All in Your Head (2nd ed.)

“Thinking and learning are not all in our head. On the contrary, the body plays an integral part in all our intellectual processes from our earliest moments in utero right through to old age. . . . Our entire brain structure is intimately connected to and grown by the movement mechanisms within our body” (p. 15).

If you are fascinated by recent developments in neuroscience, you will enjoy the first chapters of Smart Moves, in which Carla Hannaford describes how the whole body is designed to collect information through our senses and how emotions are directly tied to learning. Hannaford reports on recent observations and research in neuroscience that have shed light on the body’s ability to compensate for neurological losses. She asks why we must use limiting labels such as “learning disabled,” “emotionally handicapped,” or “mentally retarded.” Hannaford describes the functions of body systems in a readable manner throughout the first four chapters, linking scientific findings to child development and learning.

After clearly describing the physiology that leads to learning difficulties and stress, Hannaford provides several exercises that have helped her students read, focus, and learn. For example, Lazy Eights for Writing encourages children to use paper and pen to write a sideways eight starting at the middle and moving counter clockwise. This develops cross lateral integration and stimulates fluid writing, among other benefits. Each exercise is followed by a description of the physiology involved, along with a photo and examples of students who improved by using the exercise. The last portion of Smart Moves addresses the sources of stress in modern life and how movement, drinking water, and attention to diet can reduce stress and optimize learning. (LKS)
Invent to Learn: Making, Tinkering, and Engineering in the Classroom

by Sylvia Libow Martinez and Gary S. Stager.


Have you heard of the maker movement? Invent to Learn explains the maker movement, some historical background, and ways to transform classrooms into project-oriented learning spaces. Authors Martinez and Stager have extensive backgrounds in computer technology and bring this expertise to their discussion of the maker movement. In fact, technology is at the center of this book, although it also includes low-tech projects. Beginning with chapter six, you will find practical ideas for unleashing creativity through making using some exciting materials, including conductive dough, conductive paint, and plain old-fashioned cardboard. The authors believe that technological innovations are driving changes in education and should be capitalized on to revolutionize schools. They draw upon the Reggio Emilia approach, John Dewey, and others to build their argument for a constructivist methodology in education.

Martinez and Stager point to technological innovation as a new horizon for teaching. “The last technological revolution allowed children to be writers, journalists, filmmakers, composers, photographers, and broadcasters. The next technology revolution will provide kids with expanded opportunities to be mathematicians, engineers, computer scientists, game designers, and more” (p. 90). Computers should not just be used for processing information, adopting what others have created, or other low-skill uses. Children should have opportunities to create using technology. Such opportunities are currently provided by spaces such as maker fairs, fab labs, and tech shops. These are communal learning spaces where novices learn alongside experts with access to equipment such as 3D printers and precision cutters. Schools can develop their own fab labs or host maker days.

Martinez and Stager provide inspiration for setting up a maker space, creating a project-oriented environment, and implementing ideas to nudge students toward projects that solve particular problems. The teacher is facilitator in a maker space, and students take on responsibility for choosing projects, designing and implementing projects, cleaning up, organizing the space, and sharing their expertise with others. Giving students responsibility means moving out of the way to let them learn in maker spaces. (LKS)

Reference


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